



A vision for better food

From wooden packaging to solar panels: how Charlie Bigham created a recipe for sustainability

Whether it's supporting local communities or committing to greener practices, the king of home meals is on a mission to give back. Rosie Mullender finds out what drives him

For many of us, doing our bit for the planet involves buying reusable water bottles, avoiding plastic straws and recycling diligently. But for Charlie Bigham, founder of the ready-to-cook food empire that bears his name, the challenge is on an altogether different scale. He has been on a 25-year, hurdle-strewn journey that's ultimately prevented millions of pieces of plastic from being sent to landfill.

"We started using wooden packaging 15 years ago," says Bigham, as he shows me around the kitchen at his north-west London HQ. "We felt it was incongruous to be making this lovely food and selling it in plastic containers, and thought it would send a signal to shoppers that we're a bit different.

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"I think businesses can get stuck worrying, 'that will be too difficult, too expensive', but I'm not afraid of taking a risk. I decided we'd just do it, and worry about the problems later."

The long process of finding a viable alternative to plastics began with Bigham getting in touch with a family business in France that made cheese boxes from poplar, which he hoped could also be used for his food. "We had to prove the wood was hygienic, and check it was food-safe and that it wouldn't catch fire in the oven. We, of course, had to find a glue that wasn't going to melt. It took us a long time to perfect, but we're very proud of our boxes, which are completely natural and biodegradable."

The boxes are perhaps the most visible of the company's sustainability initiatives, but it doesn't stop there: Charlie Bigham's has been installing solar panelling and buying renewable energy for the past 15 years, and has been zero-to-landfill for more than a decade. "We've also recently changed how our ceramic dishes are made, using more local clay and firing them once rather than twice to halve energy use," says Bigham. "We've reduced the weight of our cardboard sleeves by 30%, which adds up to 135 tonnes of cardboard saved each year. But the more you look, the more there is to do. We're constantly thinking of new changes we can make."

This commitment to continuous change has resulted in the business's newest kitchen - built five years ago in a disused quarry near Wells in Somerset - being designed with environmental considerations in mind from the ground up.

"We took on a place that had been desolate for 25 years and breathed life back into it," says Bigham. "We worked with some great architects to create a spectacular building that's up to 25% more energy efficient than our older kitchens.

"We've planted 20 acres of wildflower meadow around us, we generate around 10% of our electricity using solar panels, and we operate our own water-treatment plant. We won an architecture award for the building, and we've had quite a few businesses visiting us to see how it's done."

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Thanks in part to these efforts, Charlie Bigham's has been afforded B Corp status, which recognises its commitment to a triple bottom-line – not just profit but people and planet too. Alongside the meals he's impressively obsessive about, people are at the heart of his business, which becomes abundantly clear as we tour the kitchens.

In between Bigham greeting his staff, we watch a pool match taking place in the subsidised staff cafe, walk past signs announcing long-service milestones (the list of people who've worked in the kitchens for more than five years is reassuringly lengthy) and chat about how his business gives back to the community. "The core of what we do, from the day we started 25 years ago, is making delicious food," says Bigham. "In the early days you have to be very focused on that, but as the business grows you've got time to take a breath and ask: 'What do we do when it comes to doing the right thing? How do we look after our team and the wider community?'




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"For example, quite a few people in our London kitchen are originally from Nepal, and after the big earthquake there in 2015, we started donating to a charity called Classrooms in the Clouds, which was rebuilding schools in isolated communities. We really care about getting things like that right."

As well as supporting his people - "We hire people, not operatives," he says firmly - Bigham donates time and profits to community projects and charities local to his kitchens. "Our links with the community are an important part of who we are," he says. "There's an infinite number of fantastic causes out there, so we like to do things that are connected to food or our communities, or are personal to our team."



The business has put its weight behind supporting three key charities. City Harvest London collects surplus food from restaurants and producers, and distributes it to community organisations feeding people in need. Chefs in Schools shows school kitchen teams how to cook tasty, nutritious meals from scratch, with a focus on seasonal food and sustainable sourcing, while Heads Up is a mental health charity located close to the Somerset kitchen.

"We've all become much more aware of mental health issues over the last decade," says Bigham. "We've done lots of stuff internally to recognise that, including appointing mental health champions, so it felt like a nice link to partner with Heads Up. As well as donating, we've also done some voluntary work with them, which is something we're hoping to do more of in future."

Twenty five years after his business was born, food is still Bigham's chief passion in life. But what's even more remarkable is his dedication to go the extra mile in every area of his business - from the annual parties he throws for staff, to the kitchens built in a way that gives something back to the planet.

"I have a belief that business is a force for good in society, and there are lots of responsibilities that come with owning one," he says.

"Yes, we're about making delicious food, but we're about a bit more than that as well. We're trying to be a business that does things the right way."

Even the best home cooks like the occasional night off, and that's where Charlie Bigham's dishes come into their own. With everything from steak pies to paella and salmon en croute, it has never been easier to feed your family well